

University of Dundee

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Shand, Wayne; van Blerk, Lorraine; Hunter, Janine

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SHELTER AND YOUNG PEOPLE LIVING ON THE STREETS

Briefing Paper 3 · June 2014

KEY POINTS

- Shelter is fundamental to all aspects of the well-being and resilience of young people living on the street; including accessing food, making a living and maintaining health.
- Children and youth find innovative ways to adapt a wide range of locations in which to snatch a few hours' sleep before being moved on.
- With no tenure or security, children and youth are displaced, their possessions destroyed and stolen; this discourages asset building and can lead to alcohol and drug dependence.
- Girls in particular face additional challenges in raising children, pregnancy and abortion, and protecting themselves from rape or assault.

INTRODUCTION

For young people living on the streets, the absence of safe, affordable shelter impacts on every aspect of their lives, including their ability to work, be healthy, cook affordable food, accumulate and maintain basic possessions (such as utensils, underwear and soap), protect themselves and their children from crime, the elements and insects as well as their emotional wellbeing and sense of self. This briefing paper provides an insight into the consequences of homelessness on the physical and emotional well-being of young people who sleep on the street, the strategies they employ to secure some form of shelter and security, the challenges they face in each of the three cities within this research project: Accra (Ghana), Harare (Zimbabwe) and Bukavu (DR Congo). It reports the findings from 18 focus groups (six in each site) on the capability theme of shelter involving 198 street children and youth aged 14-20.

DEFINING SHELTER

"You are tired after a day's work, you will have to sleep. So when you have your own room, you can sleep and wake up at any time. That is why shelter is important" (Accra Group 1).

With sporadic and inconsistent income, street children and youth have limited options for shelter in all three cities. Very few young people live with or near parents or other family members. Ideally shelter provides a degree of safety away from the eyes of the public, police and soldiers; it is shared with friends or members of their peer group; offers protection from the cold and wet and is near work opportunities. One male participant in Harare described shelter as:



"a cage-mesh, squatter house in any alleyway. That is what we call shelter on our own, because we build it in a way that we can be covered from weather conditions" (Harare Group 1).

In Harare, children sleep in alleyways, graveyards, on the top of toilet buildings; in Accra, young people sleep in market stalls, on trains, in cars, in shacks where films are shown, at public washing areas where “the mosquitoes can bite me like anything” (Accra Group 2). In Bukavu children sleep in canoes, on concrete slabs, in cars, shops, or, if they have some money, they pay to sleep on chairs in a restaurant.

“You won’t even sleep. You simply stay on chairs. In case you have no 500 francs [around 32 pence] you [...] wander all the night long until dawn” (Bukavu Group 3). A group of girls in Bukavu sleep under broken down vehicles on “cardboards”, or in sacks where they sleep “like an animal” (Bukavu Group 6). Sleeping on the ground, perhaps with a sheet, mat or cardboard box, means “you will feel pains within your body [...] you sleep on a bench, floor and so you can’t turn yourself when sleeping” (Accra Group 6). In Harare one participant “used to sleep under the benches but I stopped the day I wake up when someone had urinated on me” (Harare Group 6). In Accra and Harare, when they can afford it, a small number of young people rent space – either a shack or a shared room – on a weekly basis.

ABILITY TO SLEEP, DISTURBANCE, RISK

Without shelter, young people have insufficient sleep as they are woken and moved on. In Accra the police and council workers spray water on the streets to discourage street-sleeping, and shop owners pour water directly upon the children. In Bukavu, soldiers “spray water on you, asking you to return home” (Bukavu Group 3). Sleeping at night, in the space used as market stalls by day, children are woken at dawn by stall holders: “When you sleep and it is four [in the morning], then the person will come: ‘young man, stand up, stand up!’” (Accra Group 1).

In all three sites young people shared similar experiences in terms of the length of their sleeping periods and the threat of disturbance. In Accra, young people estimated that they get an average of five hours sleep per night, and as a result “you feel weak in your body” (Accra Group 3). Young people in Harare slept from “around 7pm or 8pm and wake up at 4am” (Harare Group 1). This was also the experience of children living in Bukavu, where they always have to be on the alert “sleeping at the shelter is like a soldier on the patrol: one

CASE STUDY: THE MARKET IN ACCRA

In Accra, markets are a popular location for young people who occupy stalls overnight when the market is closed, using cardboard and blankets for bedding and plastic sheets to provide protection from cold and rain. They have a difficult relationship with stall holders and the City Council security guards, the “abaayee” (in Ga, “they are coming”); regularly facing violent ejection from the market and destruction of their possessions.



In Harare, children often sleep together in alleyways, a “base” which gives them an identity but not necessarily protection from the authorities. One participant describes violence at the hands of the police: “I was beaten with a gun butt in the head all my airtime money was taken” (Harare Group 5).

“The alleyway is good and not good, because sleeping in there you sleep like a rabbit...you sleep while at the same time you keep an ear out [...] Because of soldiers you should sleep with one eye open” (Harare Group 5).

In Bukavu and Accra, street children described how the police demand bribes under the threat of being detained or “scattered” where their possessions are destroyed and they are chased from their sleeping places.

“When you don’t give them the bribe then they will start with the scatter. You can be lying down and they will come and cut your net. [...] Know that you don’t pay your one Cedi they will destroy your net and go and burn it” (Accra Group 4).

In all three cities, thefts take place in the night. Young people move around looking for victims (often other street children) to rob. “While he is searching others, if you try to wake up he will say, ‘young one, sleep or I will step on your head!’” (Harare Group 3).

SAVINGS AND POSSESSIONS

As a result of theft, insecurity and the destabilising influence of the authorities, maintaining even basic possessions, such as food and underwear is a constant challenge. "Even ladies panties they also steal them. When you wash and dry them, they come for it" (Accra Group 2). Young people go to great lengths to hide their possessions every day in drains, trees or under railway platforms. In Accra a "watchman" can be hired to keep possessions safe at a cost of 1 Cedi per day (20 pence), adding an expense to the cost of life on the street. Children complain that they cannot conduct business, such as hair braiding, because they cannot store the tools donated by NGOs.

CASE STUDY: SLEEPING IN VEHICLES, BUKAVU

In Bukavu young people call cars "Bulungu" (the name of a prominent hotel in the city); meaning "a safe place with a mattress". Bulungu can be abandoned vehicles or those in which they have obtained owners' permission to sleep, providing in return protection from theft or vandalism. Up to 10 people can sleep in one car, including in the boot. One male participant explains: "the problem is that you cannot stretch out your legs [...] if you change your position, you oblige the others to change as well" (Bukavu Group 3).

Investing money in basic possessions is a risk. One participant in Accra explained that a sleeping mat can cost 6 Cedis (£1.20), their food money for three days: "The way you suffered before you were able to buy it [...] then someone will come and take it without suffering" (Accra Group 2). This disincentive to saving money, or investing in possessions beyond the ephemeral, means that street children spend their money on drugs and alcohol. A street child from Accra gives an example:

"I know this (audio) speaker is nice I wish to buy it. When I buy it, there is nowhere to keep it. So what I will do is to forget about it and spend the money on unnecessary things" (Accra Group 6).

PROSTITUTION, RELATIONSHIPS AND BABIES

The experience of girls in relation to shelter across the three cities focuses heavily on sexual activity both as a



means of accessing 'safe' shelter or a place to sleep, and the fear and experience of abuse in the form of rape or sexualised assault (also a fear mentioned in Bukavu and Harare by boys). Gang rape is a reality for girls in all three cities and is a primary reason to stay with boys on the streets or with friends.

Prostitution is an important source of income for girls (and in some cases, boys) with paying clients renting rooms for the girls at bars or beer halls, or even taking them to their own homes. Sexual favour was also used as a strategy to avoid arrest, paying a debt and to escape physical abuse.

"One night I met with the police and they arrested and put me in prison, in the morning they asked me for the money before they can let me free. But I had sex with some policemen and they let me escape" (Bukavu 6).

As well as transactional sex, there were other relational encounters with boyfriends and street boys, and occasionally young people form family relationships. Boys are not always willing to accept that they have fathered a child; in Accra and Harare, when they do accept responsibility, boys often work on the streets to earn enough to rent a room for their girlfriend to live with the baby. In Bukavu, boys talked of taking babies to their parents or relatives. Both girls and boys talked about how young mothers find it difficult to keep their babies warm and dry and free from disease, insect and rodent bites while sleeping outside or in inadequate shelter. The issue of stealing babies was raised in all three countries; girls had direct experience of being woken in the night to find that someone was trying to take their baby, or being asked to sell their children. Young people who were mothers described the challenges of protecting their children from sun and rain:

"maybe the water will be passing under your mats you will put of your children at your back and one in front of you and you carry your mat and stand there" (Accra Group 2).

CONCLUSIONS

Shelter is fundamental to all aspects of the well-being and resilience of young people living on the street. Without tenure, street children experience illness, shame, discomfort and displacement; they lack the ability to securely store possessions safe from theft, vandalism or damage by the elements; it inhibits their ability to work, to eat, to be educated, to stay clean, to play, to raise their children and to express themselves.

SHELTER LOCATIONS IN THREE CITIES

INSIDE STRUCTURES

Unfinished or abandoned buildings (A) (H)
Cars and trucks (B) (H)
Phone booths (A)
Shacks and rooms rented weekly (A) (H)
Service vents (H)
Disused trains (A)
Toilets (H)
Public bathing facilities (A)

OPEN AIR

Alleyways (H)
Beaches (B)
Benches (A) (H)
Bush areas (B)
Car parks (H)
Fishing boats, canoes (B)
Graveyards (H)
Gutters and drains (H)
Roofs and slabs (A) (B) (H)
Shop fronts (A) (H)
Vacant market stalls (A)

TRADING ESTABLISHMENTS

Bars and clubs (B)
Kiosks (A)
Restaurants (B)
Shops (B)
Video shacks (A) (H)



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For further information on the research plus Briefing Papers using the words of street children and youth themselves:
www.streetinvest.org/guots · guots@dundee.ac.uk · guots@streetinvest.org

Research Directors: Professor Lorraine van Blerk, Dr Wayne Shand, Patrick Shanahan

Researcher: Janine Hunter

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